

Administration of Barack Obama, 2016

Remarks at BET's "Love and Happiness: A Musical Experience"

October 21, 2016

The President. Hello, hello, hello! Thank you. Thank you so much. Everybody, have a seat. Well, you can tell what kind of night this is. That was not the usual ruffles and flourishes.

[*Laughter*] That was not John Philip Sousa right there. [*Laughter*] This must be a BET event.

So hello, everybody!

Audience members. Hello!

The President. Welcome to the White House.

Audience member. We love you!

The President. I love you back. That's why we're having this concert. [*Laughter*]

So, over the past 8 years, Michelle and I have set aside nights like this to honor and celebrate the music that has shaped America. We've had classical. We've had country. We've had blues. We've had Broadway, gospel, Motown, Latin, and jazz. We've had Bob Dylan, and we've had Jennifer Hudson; Gloria Estefan and Los Lobos; Aretha, Patti, Smokey—it's true. I've had Paul McCartney singing "Michelle" to Michelle. [*Laughter*] And Stevie singing "Happy Birthday." We've had Buddy Guy and Mick Jagger getting me to sing "Sweet Home Chicago" one night, a little off key. [*Laughter*]

So this has become one of our favorite traditions. And it's with a little bit of bittersweetness that this is our final musical evening as President and First Lady.

Audience members. Aww!

The President. I know. [*Laughter*] It's going to be all right. [*Laughter*] Going to be all right.

And I want to thank BET for helping us out tonight to throw a great party.

So this evening, instead of focusing on a particular theme or genre, we decided to just invite some outstanding artists to help us celebrate. And I will be honest, this is one of the perks of the job that we'll miss most, along with Air Force One. [*Laughter*] And Marine One. [*Laughter*] But if you can just call up Usher and say, "Hey, come on over to my house and sing with us"—[*laughter*—or call up Janelle Monáe and say, "You know what, we need a little extra something here, can you"—[*laughter*—it doesn't get any better than that.

Although I do want to make one thing clear. This event may be called "Love and Happiness," but, much to, I know, your sadness or regret, I will not be singing Al Green this evening. [*Laughter*] Won't do it. [*Laughter*]

Now, it's no secret that Michelle and I love music, and we tried to share our passion with the rest of the country. But it is important to note we are not the first occupants of this house to fill it with music. Ever since 1801, when the U.S. Marine Band played the first reception hosted by John and Abigail Adams, live performances have always been a part of life at the White House. And by the way, another perk that I will really miss: our amazing Marine Band. They are—[*applause*]. Not only can they play anything, and I mean anything—I've seen them play with Yo-Yo Ma and then jam with B.B. King—but they're also Active Duty. So they are

not just astounding musicians, but they're also protecting this country. And Michelle and I just love them. We cannot thank them enough for their outstanding work.

Anyway, you might walk around the White House and see the fancy chandeliers and the paintings of George and Martha, and you may think that the musical performances before we got here were a little stuffy. Now, it's true they weren't quite like our musical events. [Laughter] But the truth is that throughout history, the White House has celebrated the new and the innovative. It's even been a little edgy once in a while.

President Chester A. Arthur was ahead of his time in inviting the all-Black Fisk Jubilee Singers, and their performance moved him to tears. Teddy Roosevelt welcomed Scott Joplin, because his daughter wanted to hear "that new jazz." And then, guests of the Kennedys apparently did the twist in the East Room, which may not sound like a big deal to you, but that was sort of the twerking of their time. [Laughter] It was bold. [Laughter] There will also be no twerking tonight—[laughter]—at least not by me. [Laughter] I don't know about Usher. [Laughter]

But it makes sense because this is the people's house, and it ought to reflect the amazing diversity, and the imagination, and the incredible ingenuity that defines the American people. And while much of the music that you will hear this evening—gospel, R&B, rap—is rooted in the African American experience, it's not just Black music. This is an essential part of the American experience. It's a mirror to who we are and a reminder of who we can be.

That's what American music is all about. And generations from now, I hope it's the story that the White House will continue to tell.

So with that, I'm going to stop talking. Are you ready to get started?

Audience members. Yes!

The President. If so, give it up for our first performer, the amazing, the lovely Jill Scott!

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 7:50 p.m. on the South Lawn at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to musicians Aretha Franklin, Patti LaBelle, William "Smokey" Robinson, Stevie Wonder, and Usher T. Raymond IV.

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